



**Creating Opportunities For
Independent Living And Work**

**Executive Summary, Conclusion, and
Recommendations:**

**2014 Comprehensive Statewide Vocational
Rehabilitation Consumer Needs Assessment**

**Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Research, Development, and Performance Management Department**

**In collaboration with:
Statewide Rehabilitation Council
Needs Assessment Committee**

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Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) in conjunction with the Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) conducted its annual Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment (CSNA) in the Fall of 2014. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) requires the MRC to conduct a Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment at least every three years, but the MRC administers it on an annual basis with the information and findings incorporated into the MRC's State Plan, Strategic Planning, and Quality Assurance Activities. The findings on consumer needs listed in this report are presented and shared with MRC Senior Management and VR staff, the entire body of the SRC, and other key stakeholders as part of the MRC's State Plan and continuous quality improvement processes. It is also publicly distributed via the MRC website. The 2014 CSNA process constituted a number of areas, including: a consumer survey; focus groups; analysis of key statistical and demographic information and facts; findings from other reports and surveys including the Consumer, Provider, and Counselor Satisfaction surveys, among others; and collaboration and discussion with the SRC and other key stakeholders.

The MRC 2014 Needs Assessment Survey was administered electronically via Survey Monkey in September and October 2014. A focus group of consumers was also conducted at the Consumer Conference in June 2014. There were 1,325 consumers who responded to the survey out of a total of 5,157 possible consumer recipients, for a response rate of 25.2%. The number of responses again exceeded the amount required to make statistically significant conclusions at a 99% confidence level, according to the Raosoft.com sample size calculator, by a wide margin. There was a 12.7% increase in the number of consumer respondents from the 2013 Needs Assessment Survey and a 19.4% increase in the number of consumers offered the opportunity to participate in the survey compared to 2013.

The main findings of the 2014 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment can be summarized as follows:

1. The CSNA again confirms the fact that the majority of consumers served by the MRC are people with the most significant disabilities. The findings indicate that a majority of MRC consumers require multiple Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services, transportation, and Community Living (CL) services and supports to assist them in their efforts to prepare for, choose, and obtain competitive employment. The need for multiple VR services was found to be slightly greater amongst individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds and for individuals with cognitive or psychological disabilities. The findings suggest that many consumers also require supported employment and ongoing and extended employment supports. The need

for multiple CL services was greatest among individuals with physical or sensory disabilities. (See page 110 for a key to disability groupings).

2. Overall, the majority of MRC consumers believe MRC services are addressing all or most of their needs. 80% of consumers feel MRC services are at least somewhat effective in meeting their vocational service needs (up 2% from 2012). The majority of consumers (79.3%) are somewhat or very satisfied with the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment. Many of those who feel MRC services are not meeting their needs indicate they have difficulty maintaining contact with their counselor, have not been provided consistent or adequate information on services, or have experienced changes in their assigned counselors due to high levels of staff turnover.
3. Many consumers expressed strong praise and gratitude for the hard work and support provided by the MRC and its counseling staff. It is clear that MRC and its staff make a significant positive impact on the lives of many of its consumers. A need raised by consumers included better contact with their counselor and more information about available services and MRC procedures, including information and referral to other agencies. Some consumers may not have a complete understanding of what the MRC can and cannot do for them.
4. The most important and needed VR services listed by consumers were job placement (89%), career counseling (84%), supported employment (80%), benefits planning (78%), ongoing supports to assist in retaining employment (74%), On-the-Job Training or Job Coaching (71%), and College Education (68%). School to work transition, obtaining a high school diploma, and college education were the most needed services by consumers of transition age.
5. The most important job characteristics that MRC consumers indicated they are looking for in a job include a friendly job environment (95%), job satisfaction and personal interests (95%), earning a living wage (94%), an adequate number of hours worked per week (94%), vacation and other leave benefits (89%), and promotional opportunities (88%).
6. The most common occupational areas of interest listed by MRC consumers included Community/Social/Human Services (36%), Administrative (29%), Health Care (29%), Self-Employment (26%), Customer Service (25%), and Computers/Information Technology (23%). All but Self-Employment are amongst the top 10 occupational goals by Standard Occupational Code (SOC) in consumer employment plans in the MRCIS Case Management System. The high interest amongst consumers in Self-Employment may be a function of the economy driving more people to go into self-employment. A number of consumers desired additional information on self-employment.
7. Only 32% of consumers indicated that they are aware of the Independent Living Center in their area. Individuals with psychological disabilities, younger consumers, and those in the South and North District tended to be less aware of ILCs compared to consumers with other types of disabilities.

8. Transportation continues to be an area of great need for MRC consumers. The most important and needed transportation services and options listed by consumers are public transportation (21%), the Donated Vehicle Program (18%), driver's education and training (10%), the Transportation Access Pass (10%), information about transportation options (7%), and The Ride/paratransit (7%).
9. 36% of consumers find transportation to be a potential barrier to obtaining employment. Common reasons for how transportation is a barrier include inability to access jobs via public transportation, the cost of transportation, reliability and the time required to travel via public transit or paratransit, lack of access to a vehicle, lack of a driver's license, and the distance to available jobs.
10. The most important and needed Community Living services indicated by responding consumers were affordable, accessible housing and the Mass Access Housing Registry (59%), accessible recreational services (48%), the Consumer Involvement Program (40%), the Individual Consumer Consultant (ICC) program (39%), home care (33%), assistive technology (33%), and home modification (32%).
11. When factoring out consumers who indicate they do not require Community Living services, approximately 86% of MRC consumers indicated that MRC's services were somewhat or extremely useful in assisting them to maintain independence in the community. Many consumers reflected how the MRC's assistance has been tremendously valuable. Many consumers, however, were not aware of some or all of the CL services provided by the MRC. Others indicated they do not require CL services.
12. Finding affordable and accessible housing remains a challenge for many consumers due to economic conditions and the high cost of living in Massachusetts. The Independent Living Centers may be able to assist consumers in this area, and counselors may be able to refer consumers to other resources as well.
13. A total of 18% of consumers feel they require additional services and supports. This number has fallen by about 5% since 2011. These services include job placement and job training, financial assistance, transportation, affordable and accessible housing, information on available service, assistive technology, and services and supports from other state agencies.
14. The most important single service consumers are receiving includes job placement and job search services, assistance with college education, job training, vocational counseling and guidance, assistive technology, transportation, and assistance with obtaining supplies for school and work.
15. The majority of MRC counselors are satisfied with their ability to assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining competitive employment based on their skills, interests, needs, and choices. MRC counselors are at least somewhat satisfied with most services provided to consumers, including internal job placement services, services from Community Rehabilitation Providers, and education and training provided to consumers by schools and colleges. Communication with consumers and providers was also identified by counselors as an area for improvement. Counselors identified some areas that would assist them in doing their job better, including improved support and resources for job placement, increased information on job

leads for consumers, additional job readiness trainings, and continued enhancements to the MRCIS system, among others.

16. Most consumers appear to be satisfied with services received from Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs). The majority of MRC staff also are somewhat or very satisfied with CRP services. Improved communication and information flow between CRPs and MRC staff may assist in improving service delivery to consumers and lead to more successful employment outcomes. Recent vendor expansion efforts appear to have addressed CRP capacity needs, but there still appears to be additional capacity needed in certain geographic areas and for certain populations.
17. There are areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to consumers. Specific areas include refresher trainings on the MRCIS case management system as well as on VR best practices, policies, and procedures and proper documentation of records.
18. The MRC has identified Asian and Pacific Islanders as being slightly underserved by the MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation program compared to their proportion in the overall state population. It is important to note that proportionally Asians have been the fastest growing group amongst all ethnic and racial groups served by the MRC's VR program over the last 10 years. This is also true in the state's general population. It is recommended that the MRC continue its outreach efforts to Asian communities. MRC has translated key agency marketing and information materials and is also working on translating all MRCIS correspondence letters into several Asian languages common in Massachusetts including Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer as part of its Language Access Plan.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Suggested Alternatives

MRC's 2014 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) consisted of a comprehensive process consisting of a web-based survey of active consumers, focus group, and analysis of key facts, trends, outcomes, demographics, analysis of staff training needs and findings from the Consumer Satisfaction Survey of closed consumers, a counselor survey, a vendor/provider surveys and other key reports.

Through this analysis, the CSNA has identified the needs of individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts including the need for supported employment, the services of primary importance to active VR consumers, and the needs of the overall workforce investment system in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The data and findings included here will be considered in agency policy on the development of new programs as well as changes to current programs to better serve consumers and individuals with disabilities. In addition, the CSNA is an integrated part of MRC's State Planning, Strategic Planning, and overall quality assurance activities. Findings, recommendations, and strategies from the CSNA report will be incorporated into MRC's State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation, MRC's Strategic Planning efforts, among others. The findings will be shared

with MRC Senior Management, the Statewide Rehabilitation Council, VR staff, other key stakeholders, and will be disseminated through the MRC's website.

The results of the 2014 CSNA demonstrate that a majority of MRC consumers require multiple vocational rehabilitation, transportation, and community living services and supports to assist them in reaching their vocational and independent living goals. There appears to be a higher need for some VR, transportation, and Community Living services amongst individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as among consumers with psychological or cognitive disabilities. The results suggest also many individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts are significantly impacted by economic conditions, a variable job market, and the high cost of living in Massachusetts. The following services were identified by MRC consumers as most important and needed services:

1. Job placement
2. Vocational/career counseling
3. Supported employment services and ongoing supports to assist to maintain employment
4. Benefits planning
5. On-the-job training and job coaching
6. Job/vocational training and education/tuition assistance
7. Assistance with information on transportation and public transit
8. Donated Vehicle Program
9. Driver's education
10. Assistance or referrals to supports for affordable and accessible housing
11. Assistive technology – including home modifications
12. Consumer Involvement Program

The majority of consumers indicate the MRC is providing services that are meeting their vocational needs and assisting them with maintaining their independence in the community; and the majority of consumers denoted that they are satisfied with the services they are receiving. In addition, the vast majority of consumers also appear to be satisfied with the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). Many consumers expressed strong praise and gratitude for the hard work and support provided by the MRC and its staff to assist them towards reaching their goals. Many consumers indicated that MRC and its staff have assisted them tremendously through assistance going to college or job training programs, providing interview preparation assistance, mock interviews, and job search assistance; referrals to training programs obtaining assistive devices such as hearing aids and vehicle modification, assistance with transportation, and finding other services and supports, among others. In addition, many consumers described how their counselor's counseling

and guidance, overall positive attitude, and dedication to their work have been very beneficial to them in terms of staying motivated and on target to make progress toward their goals. Some areas for improvement identified by consumers included maintaining communication and regular contact with their counselor, more information about available services, especially MRC Community Living Services, improved communication with consumers impacted by staff turnover, and information and referrals to assist in obtaining and financing housing, transportation, and other important needs. It is also clear that many consumers have been affected by the overall economy, health issues, and other factors. It is also evident there may be a level of misunderstanding amongst some consumers over what the MRC can and cannot do for them. Additionally, some consumers may have a misunderstanding about the importance of their active contribution and involvement to the VR process to assist them in moving towards their goals. The results also suggest that long term consumers served over 10 years, and consumers with higher levels of education, were more likely to indicate MRC as not currently meeting their VR needs compared to others. This should be looked into in more depth.

As the Commonwealth becomes more diverse, MRC continues to serve a higher number of consumers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Through the CSNA process, the MRC has identified Asian and Pacific Islanders as being slightly underserved by the MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation program compared to their proportion in the overall state population. It is important to note that proportionally Asians have been the fastest growing group amongst all ethnic and racial groups served by the MRC's VR program over the last 10 years. This is also true in the state's general population. There is a concentration of Asians in the VR program in the Greater Boston and Lowell areas. A language access plan has been developed as part of MRC's Agency Wide Marketing Initiative and this could assist with additional outreach efforts to Asian and other ethnic communities.

Overall, mental health, psychological, and cognitive disability impairments make up the largest proportion of MRC consumers. Psychiatric disabilities has remained the largest disability over the past decade. Over the past decade, there have been increases in consumers served with learning disabilities (+2.5% since FY2010) while there has been a decrease over the past decade in consumers with substance abuse issues (as a primary disability) and developmental disabilities. The disability profile also varies significantly by MRC Area Office.

The majority of MRC counselors are satisfied with their ability to assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining competitive employment based on their skills, interests, needs, and choices. MRC counselors are at least somewhat satisfied with most services provided to consumers, including internal job placement services, services from Community Rehabilitation Providers, and education and training provided to consumers by schools and colleges. Communication with consumers and providers was also identified by counselors as an

area for improvement. Counselors identified some areas that would assist them in doing their job better, including improved support and resources for job placement, including increased information on job leads for consumers, additional job readiness trainings, continued enhancements to the MRCIS system, among others.

Most consumers appear to be satisfied with services received from Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs). The majority of MRC staff also indicate that they are at least somewhat satisfied with CRP services. The recent addition of new CRP and expansion of other CRP programs through the Competitive Integrated Employment Services (CIES) program appears to have addressed consumer needs. However, there appear to be some areas where additional CRP capacity is needed to cover geographic or specific populations and this should be examined closer by MRC. The reopening of the Competitive Integrated Employment Services (CIES) RFR in the future or expansion of existing CRPs may address this. Finally, improved communication and information flow between CRPs and MRC staff may assist in improving service delivery to consumers and lead to more successful employment outcomes.

The CSNA has also identified areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to MRC consumers. MRC's training needs plan, workforce plan, and case review findings recommend trainings on the implementation of WIOA; Job readiness/job placement activity trainings, refresher training on the MRCIS case management system; trainings on VR best practices, policies, and procedures, and proper documentation of records. MRC continues to face high levels of staff turnover due to retirements projected to continue at a high rate through the decade. MRC's workforce plan has assisted in alleviating the situation through recruitment of new staff through VR counseling graduate student interns and through manager, supervisor, and aspiring supervisor trainings and workshops to assist in preparing current staff to become future agency leaders. Additionally, MRC has added counselor, job placement, and employment specialist positions using reallotment funding with the intent of rolling staff into permanent positions as vacancies open. The agency successfully used this practice with ARRA funding in 2009 through 2011.

Suggested Alternatives:

1. Continue to utilize findings to promote program development and planning within the agency:

The findings and recommended alternatives from the CSNA should continue to be used by agency management for planning purposes and remain an integrated part of its strategic planning and VR State Plan efforts for short and long range resource planning activities and future program development

activities. The CSNA should also be used to inform planning efforts relative to the implementation of WIOA.

2. Continue Efforts to Enhance Information to Consumers and Potential Consumers on Available Services:

Based on the results of the Needs Assessment survey and focus group, it appears some consumers are not fully aware of some of the supports and services provided by the MRC, especially Community Living Services. In addition, the findings of the Needs Assessment Survey, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, and the Counselor Satisfaction Survey all suggest some consumers do not fully understand what the MRC can and cannot do for them, and that some consumers may not completely understand their role and participation in the VR process. MRC should continue address this finding through the multi-year marketing initiative being undertaken by the MRC.

The goal is to better inform VR consumers about CL and other services which may assist them in obtaining employment and maintain independence in the community. MRC's development of a uniform, statewide orientation video and a revised Consumer Handbook for potential consumers to better educate them on what the MRC can do for them has assisted in this area. MRC is also working on a video for youth consumers.

It is recommended the MRC continue to look at ways to provide better and more comprehensive information about services beyond the video and handbook, including training staff both on what other internal MRC services are available to consumers, and consider creating an inventory, guide, or list of external resources and agencies the MRC counselors can refer consumers to. There also appears to be uncertainty on the part of consumers regarding self-employment assistance that MRC can provide. An update or revision of any documentation or handbook on self-employment services should be considered. These efforts should be beneficial to consumers. Development of a simple catalog listing all available MRC services may also be of assistance to consumers and staff. This will assist in setting realistic expectations and better inform potential consumers if they are at the right door. The Needs Assessment Committee has begun exploring creation of such a guide. Additionally, MRC is researching the potential of acquiring electronic signs to put in local area offices as a medium to provide program and other important information to consumers coming into the offices.

3. Focus on Improving Communication between Consumers and Counselors:

Findings from the Needs Assessment Survey, Counselor Survey, Satisfaction Survey, and other elements of the CSNA suggest counselors are having difficulty maintaining contact with some

consumers based on the increased number of consumers in the MRC VR program over the past several years. This is also evident when looking at the closure reasons for consumers closed unsuccessfully from the VR program. A task force or workgroup consisting of VR staff from all levels should be created to further review this issue and develop strategies to assist counselors in maintaining regular communication with consumers on their caseload. MRC should also look at ways to improve communication with consumers on caseloads where there are vacancies while they are being refilled. The upcoming addition of the capacity to email correspondence letters from MRCIS is one avenue for improvement. Efforts to improve the flow of cases through the VR system by reducing backlog of cases at critical points such as referral, eligibility, and IPE development may also assist in improving communication. A study on Status 28 unsuccessful closures may also provide some suggestions and recommendations which may assist in this area. Communication is a two-way street, and the results suggest a need for improvement in communication on both the counselor and consumer end.

4. Consider continuing the Donated Car Program beyond FY2015 based on available resources:

The Donated Car Program currently operated in partnership with Good News Garage was again one of the top transportation resource needs specified by consumers. As mentioned before, the program has been extended through FFY2015. The program has been very successful over the past several years in assisting consumers in obtaining transportation to assist them with going to work based on an analysis of employment outcomes and a satisfaction survey. Consumers receive a donated vehicle that is repaired and inspected for safety and receive training on how to maintain and register a vehicle. Consumers must have the resources to register, insure, and maintain the vehicle. MRC is also piloting a link between this program and the CVS Pharmacy Technician training program to provide vehicles to consumers who complete the program to access employment at CVS's regional pharmacy technician calling center.

5. Continue to Improve Collaboration with Independent Living Centers:

Independent Living Centers (ILCs) remain important partners to MRC who can provide additional peer-driven supports to MRC consumers to assist them in their efforts to obtain employment and maintain independence in the community. Given that only 32% of consumers are aware of the ILC in their area, the MRC should continue to improve referrals and collaboration between VR offices and the ILCs. In addition, MRC should consider efforts to increase consumer awareness of the ILCs, especially among individuals with psychological and cognitive disabilities. A task force or workgroup could be set up to assist with this process. In addition to leveraging existing VR-ILC contracts, MRC should also consider open houses, joint orientations, or other meetings and presentations in collaboration with the ILCs. Joint marketing efforts could also be considered. Collaborations such as the Transitional Internship Program are a good example of beneficial collaborations with the ILCs. This program should be considered for expansion as part of the new Pre-Employment Transition Services required under WIOA.

6. Continue Efforts to Improve Services to Transition-Aged Consumers:

As transition-aged youth comprise of a large portion of MRC VR referrals, and with the strong emphasis on serving youth that will come with the implementation of WIOA, including pre-employment transition services, it is very important that the agency continue to focus on how to best serve these consumers, whose needs often differ from traditional adult VR cases. MRC should consider expansion of the Worcester Office's Summer Internship Program, continuation and possible expansion of other youth initiatives such as the Transitional Internship Program (TIP), and consider other efforts to provide services to transition students. MRC should continue its efforts to improve transition services through promoting best practices, continuing collaboration with local schools and Community Colleges, and ensuring that the recently completed Family Guide to Transition Services in Massachusetts is available to consumers and their families and to staff, MRC offices, and schools. MRC is also working to finalize new transition brochures for students, families, schools, and other stakeholders. MRC should continue to participate in webinars and trainings on transition services, research strategies and programs to expand pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities and come up with strategies to refer additional youth consumers to the Statewide Employment Services office for supported employment services.

7. Continue to Promote On-The-Job Training, Increased Employer Engagement, and Industry-Based Trainings to increase employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities:

MRC has demonstrated over the past several years that On-The-Job Training (OJT) is an important and effective tool for training and employing consumers in competitive jobs in many industries and occupations. OJT can also be an effective tool to assist in eliminating stigma against consumers with disabilities by demonstrating the abilities and skills of individuals with disabilities directly to employers in their workplace. OJT was identified as an important service by 71% of consumers in the Needs Assessment survey and counselors have also identified the need for additional OJTs. In addition, MRC should continue its employer engagement strategies through the efforts of its internal Job Placement team, its account management system, and events such as the Annual Federal Contractor Hiring event. MRC should also continue to evaluate the outcomes of its industry-based training program with CVS Pharmacy to train and employ consumers in Pharmacy Technician positions across the state through classroom training and OJTs. This collaboration could be used as a potential model to use with other companies to establish similar programs with the goal of increased employment outcomes for consumers and as a way to market the skills and abilities of individuals with disabilities to the private sector.

8. Continue Staff Trainings and Workforce Planning Efforts to Assist in Improving Service Delivery to VR Consumers:

The CSNA has identified areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to MRC consumers. Based on these findings, trainings on the implementation of WIOA; Job readiness/job placement activity trainings (resume writing, local job markets/labor market information, career assessments, etc.); Refresher training on the MRCIS case management system; Counselor, supervisor and management trainings on VR best practices, policies, and procedures, and effective practices for supervision; Serving consumers with criminal histories; and proper documentation of records is recommended. In addition, the agency should continue its efforts to create e-learnings for staff on a variety of topics. It is also recommended MRC continue its workforce planning efforts as it updates its Workforce Plan in 2014 to continue recruitment of new staff through VR counseling graduate student interns and continue to provide ongoing manager, supervisor, and aspiring supervisor trainings and workshops to assist in preparing current staff for promotional opportunities within the agency.

9. Continue to Increase Consumer Awareness of Transportation Options such as the Transportation Access Pass (TAP) Program:

This year's Needs Assessment demonstrates that transportation remains a significant need for many MRC consumers. In addition to some of the other ideas and recommendations, one way for the MRC to better assist its consumers is continue to promote and increase awareness of the Commonwealth's Transportation Access Pass (TAP) program. This program allows individuals with disabilities to utilize public transportation from the MBTA and other regional transit authorities across the state at a greatly reduced rate. It appears many consumers are not aware of this program which could significantly reduce their transportation costs. MRC should work to promote the distribution of its new transportation fact sheets which are now on MRC's website to consumers and incorporate these into trainings and informational materials. There is an increase in consumers indicating they use this program from previous years, suggesting that a better job is being done across the board in getting the word out on this program. Development of other informational materials and training should be considered to assist consumers in learning about other available resources including local Councils on Aging. In addition, MRC should consider possible collaboration with MassRides, the EOHHS Human Services Transportation (HST) Office, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Career Centers, and other organizations on projects or programs that might be able to assist consumers with transportation, given that transportation is a systemic issue requiring collaboration on multiple levels.

10. Continue Outreach to Communities of Ethnic and Diverse Backgrounds on Vocational Rehabilitation and other MRC service offerings, especially in the Asian Community:

The MRC has made a commitment to reach out to individuals with the most significant disabilities who are also ethnic and cultural minorities through its Diversity Committee and through its Language Access

Plan. The MRC should continue these outreach efforts to ethnic and cultural minorities, especially to the Asian community, which has been identified as slightly underserved by the VR program in Massachusetts. MRC should focus on how to reach out effectively to these communities, including conducting outreach to local community agencies and organizations that serve ethnic and cultural minorities, among other methods. It is also recommended the MRC continue its efforts through its marketing initiative to reach out to the Asian community and other minority communities, and complete the translation of all letters from MRCIS into all identified languages in the language plan and incorporate them into the system. It is also recommended that the MRC's Diversity Committee, the SRC Needs Assessment Committee and Unserved/Underserved committee consider meeting jointly to come up with ideas for enhanced outreach to minority communities, including the Asian community.

11. Increase utilization of Electronic Resources to Communicate with Consumers:

Once again, consumers recommended in both the focus group and needs assessment survey that MRC utilize more electronic methods to communicate with consumers, such as e-mails, text messages, social media, Skype, and other similar methods. Counselors also indicated they would like more tools to communicate with consumers in this year's Counselor Satisfaction Survey. This year's addition of a question asking consumers their preferred method of communication is a start to collecting more information on consumer preferences. Email was by far the most preferred method of communication, followed by phone/cellphone. Given that communication continues to become more electronic, to keep up with technology, it is recommended that MRC should continue to consider ways to increase electronic communication with consumers. This may also improve consumer to counselor communication and may potentially assist in reducing the number of consumers closed out unsuccessfully because they cannot be located. A series of staff trainings on electronic communication should be considered. This will become more important in the future as consumers are more and more versed in communicating electronically and as MRC moves towards a fully paperless VR case management system. Other states have used text messaging and online dashboards as communication tools. These should be researched as potential alternatives.

12. Continue to Utilize CSNA results to inform future studies/analysis:

The CSNA provides a series of interesting findings and data worthy of further study. The survey suggests that additional studies and research about the impact of various VR services on employment outcomes, and variations in VR needs among different populations such as transition-aged youth, ethnic/racial minorities, older job seekers, by gender, and by disability type may be useful to the agency in finding ways to better meet the needs all of its consumers. The CSNA has been used before as a basis to conduct comprehensive staff surveys to analyze issues and challenges related to housing and homelessness, transportation, and other issues. The MRC should also consider researching

underemployment of individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts and how its services can assist consumers in obtaining adequate employment which meets their needs. MRC should also consider conducting a study of how resource limitations impact service provision.

13. Continue to further refine the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment process to reach out to additional consumers and to compare results over multiple years:

The agency should continue its process of continuous improvement to the CSNA process with input from the SRC Needs Assessment Committee, and should continue to review RSA guidance and best practices from other states as part of this process. This process of continuous improvement has been very beneficial and has led to a strong annual product that has resulted in actions being taken to address its recommendations and findings. Other states have also come to MRC to learn about our CSNA process and MRC's CSNA process and overall use of data to track performance and make decisions was noted by RSA staff during a recent monitoring visit. Consumer needs are a dynamic, moving target, and as new policies and new priorities are established, consumer needs will continue to evolve. The CSNA will likely need to be enhanced and modified to assist with the implementation of new WIOA reporting, performance, and state planning requirements. The agency should also consider conducting a multi-year analysis or creating a long term trend report of consumer needs. This could be done through examining data from past Needs Assessments, especially now that a five year baseline has been established administering the survey electronically. Finally, it is recommended MRC work with the Committee to discuss how to reach out to more consumers to identify their needs, especially in underserved populations such as the Asian community, through methods such as the regional and population-specific focus groups being considered. The translation of the Needs Assessment survey into Spanish is planned for 2015 and additional translations should also be considered.

14. Continue to Develop/Utilize methods and products to assist with Job Matching and providing additional job leads to consumers and counselors:

The MRC should continue its efforts to enhance efforts to match consumers' interests and skills with potential occupational areas and job opportunities. MRC has undertaken several efforts in this area including purchase of the ResuMate software system to allow staff to match consumer skills from resumes to required skills from job leads. Other efforts are also being researched. These efforts will assist MRC counselors and placement staff in better determining what direction to point consumers in to assist them in obtaining employment. Both MRC counselors and consumers expressed the desire for improved job matching and increased sharing of job leads that could lead to employment outcomes for consumers. The team model used in some offices where the JPS, ESS, and the counselor work together as a team to assist consumers in obtaining employment should be considered as a best-practice model that can be adopted across offices.

15. Continue to Assist Community Rehabilitation Programs:

It is recommended the MRC continue its efforts to assist and improve Community Rehabilitation Programs through support and financial assistance to providers in the conversion of sheltered employment to supported employment. MRC only places consumers into competitive employment opportunities. Recent rate increases to the Competitive Integrated Employment Service (CIES) procurement should assist CRPs. This year's CSNA findings suggest that the recent addition of additional vendor capacity in terms of new CRP vendors and expanded vendors have assisted in meeting needs for CRP capacity to serve MRC consumers. However, it appears additional CRP capacity may be needed in some areas, both geographically and to serve specific populations. It is recommended that MRC inquire about whether the Competitive Integrated Employment Service procurement can be reopened in 2015 to allow MRC to qualify additional CRPs which may assist in meeting the needs of VR consumers and individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts.

It is also recommended that MRC continue efforts to improve communication and information flow between CRPs and MRC to using a team communication approach with the provider, counselor, supervisor, and regional contract supervisor, and continue regular meetings and communication with the Providers Council. It is also recommended the MRC continue its collaboration with Community Rehabilitation Programs through the Partnership Plus Advantage Program. MRC should also consider working with CRPs as an avenue to assist in providing pre-employment transition services to individuals with disabilities as required under WIOA.

16. Continue Efforts to Collaborate with Other Components of the Workforce Investment System in Massachusetts to Serve the Needs of Individuals with Disabilities and to plan for WIOA Implementation:

The MRC should continue to collaborate with other elements of the workforce investment system to seek out collaborative opportunities including possible projects and grants that may assist individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts in obtaining competitive employment. In addition, MRC should continue its efforts to maintain a presence at the Massachusetts Career Centers and on State and Local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). It is recommended that the MRC's job placement specialists and other assigned VR staff continue to work closely with local Career Centers to provide high quality vocational rehabilitation services to people with disabilities seeking expanded employment opportunities and to make the Career Centers more responsive to the needs of individuals with disabilities including providing disability sensitivity training for Career Center staff. MRC should also consider developing a workgroup with the Career Centers and other core partners of the Statewide Workforce Investment

system as defined in WIOA to develop plans and strategies for implementation of WIOA. MRC will need to increase linkages to core partners as a result of WIOA.

17. Continue to Evaluate and Research Computer and technology skills trainings or web-based trainings and assessments for Consumers To Assist in Obtaining Employment:

As the world becomes more mobile and electronic, it becomes increasingly important the MRC assist consumers in preparing for employment by developing and refining skills in using technology. A number of consumers indicated the desire for trainings and workshops on computer skills and other technology. MRC has established a pilot project to utilize a web-based system called the Manpower Training and Development Center (TDC) for consumers to undergo industry-based assessment, evaluation, skills development, and job matching. Packages are provided for Microsoft Office programs and for specific occupations including administrative assistants, stock clerks, call centers, customer service representatives, amongst other job areas. Initial results suggest a high rate of employment for those consumers who fully complete the modules. MRC also recently purchased access to web-based assessment tools for counselor use. The MRC should continue to evaluate results of these efforts in terms of employment outcomes and its overall benefit to consumers, and continue to research additional electronic and web-based assessment, training, and evaluation solutions to assist consumers with preparing for and obtaining employment.

18. Continue Efforts to Provide Quality Services to Individuals with Learning Disabilities:

The MRC has seen an increase in consumers served with specific learning disabilities (LD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) over the past decade. In FY2014, 20.8% of all consumers had ADHD or a specific learning disability. MRC recently added skills training through a qualified vendor for consumers with learning disabilities receiving supported employment services based on the needs of this population. It is recommended that the MRC continue to work closely with the SRC LD/ADHD subcommittee to find ways to enhance services for consumers with LD/ADHD if needed.

19. Research ways to Increase Availability of Job Readiness Trainings:

Results from the Needs Assessment Survey, the Counselor Satisfaction Survey, and the Provider Satisfaction Survey suggest the need to develop more job readiness training programs to assist consumers in obtaining employment. MRC should research and evaluate the feasibility of establishing additional job and work readiness programs. Work readiness training is also one of the required pre-employment transition service categories for students with disabilities under WIOA, and establishment of additional programs and resources in this area could benefit all MRC consumers, including students with disabilities, and assist in the implementation of WIOA.

20. Continue to develop strategies and systems for implementation of WIOA:

MRC should continue its efforts to plan, prepare, and implement new requirements under WIOA. A steering committee has been established for the VR program and it is recommended that a project management plan be developed to assist with implementation. MRC should continue to participate in webinars and trainings on WIOA, register for communication from the federal government and other key stakeholders, and begin discussions with other core partners. MRC should also scope out its current expenditures and capacity to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities and come up with strategies to refer additional youth consumers to the Statewide Employment Services office for supported employment services.

21. Consider Creation of a Guide or List to Assist in Procuring Products and Materials from Vendors:

In the Counselor Satisfaction Survey, some counselors indicated they would benefit from additional information about available vendors and the materials they supply. It is recommended that a guide or list of resources providing more information about available vendors for purchasing items for consumers be developed. This guide would list available vendors and the particular products/materials that are provided by each vendor.

22. Consider development of workshops for consumers on conducting an electronic job search and maintaining their online identity:

Given the electronic nature of the modern world, MRC consumers could certainly benefit from a workshop on using electronic and social media in the job search process. Some Career Centers provide similar workshops, and a program provided within the VR office might be useful to consumers. In addition, the importance of maintaining an appropriate online identity is also important as many employers look at potential employee's social media and other public internet activity during the hiring process. The proposed workshop would include tips on managing one's online identity (e.g., creating a professional email account and scanning social networking pages for any material that could be misinterpreted by an employer); tips for creating resumes that can be cut and pasted into online job applications; use of professional networking sites such as LinkedIn; and guidance on navigating the multitude of job search sites which exist. The MRC could also refer consumers to workshops in this area being offered at local libraries or Career Centers. This could also be another service that can be provided to students with disabilities as a pre-employment transition service.

23. Continue to Focus on collecting valid email addresses for VR consumers:

MRC should continue its emphasis on the importance of collecting, recording, and maintaining valid email addresses in the MRCIS system. While the proportion of consumers with email addresses has increased significantly each year over the past five years, notable variations between some area offices in terms of the proportion of consumers in each office with an email address in the MRCIS system still exist. In addition, as job search processes have become more electronic, it is important that consumers have a valid and appropriate email address to apply for positions online and communicate with employers. A certain percentage of MRC consumers may not have an email address when they begin services. In these situations it is important for MRC counselors to assist the individual with setting up a free email account such as Gmail or Hotmail. It is also very likely that many consumers have active email accounts, but this information is not being recorded. MRC will be implementing an enhancement to the MRCIS case management system in March 2015 which will allow emailing of official letters and other correspondence from counselors to consumers. This can currently only be done by regular mail. This is expected to further increase the proportion of email addresses in MRCIS and benefit consumers in improving their ability to find competitive employment as well as assisting counselors in maintaining regular contact with their consumers. This will also assist in improving quality of data stored in MRCIS, leading to improved communication with consumers and facilitating higher response rates to electronic surveys. It is recommended that MRC complete an E-learning training for staff on email addresses and continue to emphasize the importance of recording addresses in relevant trainings and bulletins.

24. Attempt to Increase the Number of Vendors for Driver's Education and Training the Next Time the Procurement is Opened:

Over the past several years, the CSNA findings demonstrate a number of consumers who indicate they need driver's education services through survey results and open-ended responses. It is recommended that MRC should research the next time the Adaptive Driver Evaluation and Training Procurement will be opened for new vendors, and at that time should consider attempting to increase the number of qualified vendors under the RFR to assist with improving driver's education and adaptive evaluation services to consumers.